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Sen. Gilbert's pier-safety legislation signed into law

LANSING — Sen. Jud Gilbert's effort to increase safety near Michigan piers and beaches was signed into law today by the governor.

Gilbert sponsored legislation that makes it a crime for anyone who tampers with or steals a marine-safety device maintained by a state or local government.

Public Acts 233 and 234 are sponsored by Gilbert and Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, who each represent districts that border one of the Great Lakes. The Legislature approved both measures with large bipartisan majorities.

"It is important that people understand how critical life preservers are in preventing drowning and that if they are stolen or damaged it could hinder a person's chances for survival should they fall into the water," Gilbert said. "These new laws will serve as a deterrent and will help save lives."

The measures make it a misdemeanor for anyone to tamper with or steal a marine-safety device maintained by the state or a local government. If a person dies or becomes permanently disabled because the device was unavailable or unusable, the offender could be found guilty of a felony.

The plan has been vigorously supported by Vicki Cech, the mother of a Grand Haven youth who drowned while swimming near the Grand Haven pier. A rip current swept Cech's son, Andy Fox, away before his friends could find a life preserver to throw to him.

Besides pushing for tougher laws, Cech and other members of the Great Lakes Beach and Pier Safety Task Force have created informational material to educate people how to use piers safely and about the dangers of rip currents. The group's Web site is located at www.respectthepower.org.

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